

Ice arena site selection reflects a flawed process

By Rodney Berry

During its May 15 meeting, the Owensboro City Commission voted to build a new ice arena next to the existing facility on land owned by the National Guard Armory. This may prove to be the best and most obvious site, but it brings to mind a broader issue of process and the public role in decision making.

When public funds are used, the public has every right to have a meaningful role in the decision of where to build public facilities. This should not simply mean that the public has an opportunity to respond to a recommendation at a public hearing or a meeting in which the vote is to take place. When that happens, groups tend to mobilize their members to intimidate officials or out shout the opposition.

A better process incorporates the following steps:

1. Develop criteria based on what characterizes an ideal site: visibility, accessibility, spin-off potential, parking, cost, expansion capacity, etc. Criteria will vary from project to project and some criteria may outweigh other criteria.
2. Present the options under consideration and acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of each option.
3. Allow the public an opportunity to suggest other options and comment early in the deliberations.

Will a public process drive up land prices? Perhaps. But that is less likely to happen if multiple sites are considered and options acquired in the short term.

In the case of the ice arena, there are obvious advantages: central, familiar location; room to grow; ample parking; good access via Parrish Avenue; \$1.00 lease from the armory. The current facility has long outlived its expected use. Project advocates have coped with promises and delays and few officials want to stretch out the decision any further.

The disadvantages of the armory site appear to be connected with potential lost opportunities. That is, could an ice arena be combined with other projects to create more vitality, synergy and impact? Could a mixed use project in another location stimulate retail, restaurants or other private investment? In some communities, retail shops, hotel rooms, offices

or condominiums wrap around ice facilities. Could another location increase our chances of landing a minor league hockey team?

Would it have been better to wait until the Downtown Development Corporation presents its plan to determine if a downtown or riverfront ice arena location offers a unique opportunity?

Officials who voted for the armory site are certainly well-meaning. They appear to make decisions carefully. But how many site selections of public projects in recent years have been made by a handful of officials without any substantive public participation? How many mandated public hearings have been held after the decision was essentially made? How many officials used objective criteria in comparing site options? If they did, why don't they share their findings?

Nearly two decades ago, RiverPark Center leaders used a site selection consultant who worked with a citizens committee to examine the attributes and shortcomings of various sites. The committee changed its recommendation and selected a riverfront site that has been consistently applauded.

The Owensboro Community College site selection process was characterized by extensive public participation. Proponents of a downtown plan took on those who wanted a site off the by-pass. Most would agree that OCC (now OCTC) has proved that it needed room to grow where it is.

In other instances, there was little (if any) public participation. If the public had had a meaningful role in the site selection process, would the Daviess County Detention Center been built on riverfront property? Would Panther Creek Park been built in a more visible and accessible location? Would the U.S. Post Office been more centrally located? Would OMU have left downtown? Would the Social Security office been built in a cornfield on the edge of town? Would the location of the judicial center or the public library or the proposed hospital be any different?

Ultimately officials need to make a decision, and that is often unpopular in some circles. But we can do a better job of engaging the public and facilitating a process that builds confidence and assurance that the decisions have been made in the public interest.

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